WHEN THE SLANTING RAYS of the setting sun caressed the still waters of the Sun Lake, it was curtains for the fifth consecutive year for the annual jamboree that is the Surajkund Mela. And before it begins all over again next year, a pause for reflection seems to be called for. For, increasingly, the reaction of the ethnic-crazy elite of Delhi to this regular shopping spree is, "Nothing new, really. But you could pick up a thing or two if you really look."

Every year, in the first fortnight of February, Surajkund wears a carefully orchestrated rural ambience, the *gharara-cholied mehndi walis* and old men puffing away at *hookahs*, the *bhopa-bhopi* troupes and bioscope *walas* striking a note of unreality against the antiseptic cleanliness of fresh structures and strategically-strewn *charpoys* with their brand-new coir mattings. All achieved by the Surajkund Mela Authority comprising the Ministry of Tourism, the Development Commissioner, Handlooms, the Development Commissioner, Handicrafts, Crafts Museum, Delhi, and Haryana Tourism, at an average annual cost of Rs 15 lakh, with an additional expenditure of Rs 10 lakh on maintenance and launch of the theme, which changes every year.

On the credit side, going by the three crore visitors drawn to the *mela* last year, the Mela Authority generates at least Rs 5 crore by way of gate collections. Even discounting what is spent on housing and feeding the 350-odd craftspersons, their travel arrangements and compensation paid for the 21 man-days lost, this is cause enough for celebration for the Haryana government for having snatched away a fat share of the ethnicity cake literally from under Delhi's nose.

But, given the increasing sense of *ennui* amongst the *mela's* intended audience, it's also cause for concern.

For one, Delhi—at least the south Delhi that matters within the *mela* milieu—has its fair share of handlooms and handicrafts exhibitions, in addition to its permanent emporia complex. So, the encapsulated cultural all-in-one pill that Surajkund has, on the one hand, become, is in a sense administered to jaded palates.

On the other hand, the *mela* as a bird's eye view of exotica aimed at the foreign tourist is not, as one Vienna-based journalist pointed itself enough to bring in people from abroad.

According to Haryana Tourism's backgrounder, the main objectives of the *mela* are to highlight outstanding handicrafts and handloom traditions, save dying crafts from oblivion, emphasise the rural ambience for foreign and domestic tourists and help craftspersons sell their products without middlemen. Live demonstrations are meant to form an important part, as they create an appreciation for an unknown medium in the mind of the buyer and generate empathy for the workmanship that goes into every handcrafted piece.

But, if [illegible] participants at the fair are to be believed, live demonstrations have dwindled. And even though the Mela Authority spends as much as Rs 10 lakh on publicity, there is little effort to inform the public about the various crafts.

Piggy-backing on tourism, as crafts marketing does in India, the craft is the carrot while tourism is the end. Undoubtedly, this is an unhealthy situation for crafts but it is worse still for tourism, considering that political instability at home has frightened away the international tourist, with even the brouhaha over the Visit India Year dying down to a whimper. So, the germ of interest created by such a *mela* — at exorbitant cost— is unlikely to be carried forward.

There is a crafts side to the coin as well. Given the environment of "market or perish" in the traditional crafts sector, Surajkund, with its immense subsidy and captive audience is a once-in-the-year opportunity that is every craftsperson's ideal dream. Considering the dream bursts after just 15 days, this creates its own brand of desperation amongst craftspeople.

Prices at the *mela* are not dictated by market forces but by the philosophy of making enough to sustain their year-long sporadic sales. Despite a high-powered selection committee to monitor selection, the most vocal and skilled—who, anyway, are the survivors—find repeated patronage at the various *melas* held countrywide.

The sell-now-forever dictum also results in higher prices—at times even higher than the emporia where, if insiders are to be believed, there is a 300 per cent mark-up on the cost price. Manish Bahl, Secretary, Tourism, [illegible] Chairman of the Surajkund Mela Authority, makes this point when he says, "We do not control the price but can only bring together the buyer and the seller—dictating the price would mean taking on the role of the middleman."

Yet, the frenzy of the sellers to off-load as much as they can on the market results in the craftsperson bringing in high-value, low-volume products. This, in turn, further narrows the market to a miniscule moneyed class, totally alienating the craftsperson from the larger market segment—the burgeoning middle class.

By the very process of natural selection, Surajkund reinforces the production of the elite drawing-room variety of crafts—say, the exotic *kalamkari* as against the ordinary *dhoti*. So one wonders what happens to the lesser village crafts, like the *fool jhadoos* or woven baskets?

What could help, taking into account the annual nature of the *mela*, is if participants were intimated of their selection in time—say, six months in advance considering some crafts need a longer manufacturing time. Instead, craftspersons point out that they receive anywhere between a week to a month and a half's notice though *mela* authorities insist invitations are sent out two months in advance. Yet, as a *kantha* worker states, "We need at least six months to make the intricate pieces."

What would also help is if *melas*, be it Surajkund or any other, be made a permanent feature, along the lines of the recently-proposed *haat* being planned on an experimental basis at the Red Fort grounds, where craftspersons could rent out stalls, subject to a maximum period, so that everyone gets a fair chance to sell and survive.

These lacunae notwithstanding, it is unfair to dismiss Surajkund as cultural *kitsch*. As Jaya Jaitly, crafts authority and member of the Surajkund Mela Authority, puts it, "When it comes to marketing crafts, every effort counts." It does facilitate buyer-seller interaction and provides a marketing outlet. But to presume that it does much more—an impetus to tourism—is faulty logistics. Surajkund is, at best, a promotional venture, the first step on the craftsperson's route to ready access to the market.

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